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Serious fun with Lost Fingers

Quebec's gypsy jazz phenomenon laughs it up, but the wildly popular trio's musicianship is no joke

BERNARD PERUSSE
THE GAZETTE

What started as a musical laugh hatched by a couple of classical guitar students has become a love affair with Quebec.

So close has the bond become that the Lost Fingers, the dark-horse darlings of the free shows at last year's Montreal International Jazz Festival, are back tonight to play a ticketed show at the 2,100-capacity Metropolis.

A lot of the credit goes to the trio's first album, Lost in the 80s, which has sold 130,000 copies here. Their relationship with Quebec is reciprocal: Their latest disc, Rendez-Vous Rose, is devoted to francophone hits – some of them a bit kitsch.

The new album's formula is no surprise: As they did with 1980s chart singles by Michael Jackson, AC/DC and Paula Abdul on their first album, the Lost Fingers have applied pure gypsy jazz swing to 1970s biggies by the likes of Michel Louvain and Boule Noire. On some tracks, performers like Éric Lapointe, Nanette Workman and Daniel Lavoie join in the fun.

And, as the group's increasing number of devotees will tell you, fun is a big part of the attraction – not least of all for the three players, guitarists Byron Mikaloff and Christian Roberge and bassist Alex Morissette.

"We always laugh," Mikaloff said during a recent interview on a promotional stop in Montreal. "When we come up with a title to cover, the three guys will just laugh, and we attack it in that sense – but we're only laughing because the piece is out of date or absurd, let's say, because it's sung from a woman's perspective."

"As long as we can keep doing great music ... that will determine the longevity of our career."
The Lost Fingers' Byron Mikaloff

"But what's interesting about the project is that we do it seriously, too," Roberge added. "We're not comics. We're trying to do a good version and a good arrangement. The fun is more in the song choices we're making than in the work we're doing as musicians."

Sometimes the singularity of a quirky vision can brand a group as a novelty act, but Mikaloff was quick to argue that AC/DC and U2 have a distinct sound as well. "A one-trick pony? It could be labelled as that, but we're great musicians. As long as we can keep doing great music, surprising people with the weirdest covers you can imagine and making them laugh and have a good time, that will determine the longevity of our career."

Mikaloff and Roberge met as classical guitar students at the Conservatoire de musique et d'art dramatique du Québec. Both developed the gypsy jazz fever after being exposed to the music of Angelo Debarre and the manouche swing legend Django Reinhardt. (The group's name alludes to the two digits Reinhardt could not use after a fire accident.)

"I really loved (Reinhardt's) playing, his expressivity," Roberge said. Before long, their classical duets began to include more Reinhardt material.

The moment of epiphany came in 2006, when the two were at a gas station and a Samantha Fox song came on the radio. While Mikaloff was filling up, Roberge played along and suggested they record a tribute to the 1980s. An arrangement of Fox's Touch Me (I Want Your Body) was worked out.

As fate would have it, word came a few months later that Fox was looking for 30 versions of the song to commemorate its 20th anniversary. The duo knew an opportunity when they saw it.

They recruited Morissette, who had worked with Mikaloff in the group One Ton, to help record the Fox cover. The bassist came for the sessions and never left. As more songs from the 1980s were added to the repertoire, corporate gigs helped spread the word.

With two high-concept albums under their belts, the list of potential projects for the group seems endless: '80s faves, disco hits, one-hit wonders, Beatles or Elvis Presley classics and Gregorian chants have all been jokingly (or not so jokingly) mooted.

One of the group's favourite in-jokes centres on recording an album of songs Roberge hates, like Thomas Dolby's She Blinded Me with Science.

"I'm not sure Christian would tough out the tour," Mikaloff said.

"Sure, I wouldn't mind," Roberge countered. "Rearranged by the Lost Fingers, they would be much better."

The Lost Fingers perform tonight at 6 at Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E., as part of the Montreal International Jazz Festival. Tickets cost $29.50. Phone 514-790-1111 or go to ticketpro.ca.

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MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE
Byron Mikaloff (left), Christian Roberge and Alex Morissette have a long list of possible projects.

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PODCASTS
Bernard Perusse talks about his must-see shows and gives a critic's-eye view of the jazz fest.

jazz fest notes

Guy Bélanger blows his way to glory; Esperanza Spalding justifies the love

THURSDAY NIGHT

Wearing his Batman-like utility belt of harmonicas, an energetic **Guy Bélanger** – accompanied by his quintet – powered through performances of original compositions and classic blues tunes at L'Astral, turning his cheeks bright red as he ripped solos that would give Toots Thielemans a run for his money.

With a powerhouse set, an endearing stage presence and a monstrous musical talent, he elevated himself from being the sideman of countless Québécois music legends to being one of them.

JAKE SHENKER

Buddy Guy's shows are never measured in songs, but in moments. You might be well into the show and wonder when Best Damn Fool became Hoochie Coochie Man, how Boom Boom led us to Mustang Sally or when the explosive Sunshine of Your Love riff left the tender Skin Deep in the dust.

What sticks in the mind are snapshots: Guy splitting the thick, heavy air in the ridiculously packed Metropolis with a single piercing guitar note, unleashing mighty sheets of barking licks that collide with each other, gently teasing the same note for a minute or flapping his arms at his sides while singing falsetto as the band vamps almost silently.

I'm not sure I have ever seen Guy as hot as he was Thursday night.

BERNARD PERUSSE

How exactly a round-faced, Jiffy Pop white boy from Boston can produce a sound like this is a mystery. Eli "Paperboy" Reed, seen on the GM stage, tosses his head back, howls at the moon, flies across the stage like a madman, grabbing the mike in mid-air, then falls to his knees with a scream. No messin' around now, this boy means business. Backed by **the True Loves**, a six-piece powerhouse band with a healthy horn section and some killer falsetto backups, Paperboy delivers a soul-packed punch.

NATASHA HALL

As far as technique goes, A-think Oscar Peterson in his flat-out prime, with a Latin flavour. With his knees almost touching the keys, **Chucho Valdés**, at Théâtre Maisonneuve, roamed from a medley of standards to tributes to Duke Ellington and Joe Zawinul, a ballad and a Cuban piece, laced seamlessly with American musical references. Wearing his trademark cap backward, Valdés, 67, made that piano sing, at times playing different melodies with each hand simultaneously. He owned the keyboard. He made it dance with his amazing dexterity, always retaining precision and control and never short of an idea.

IRWIN BLOCK

Last year **Alice Russell** had us begging for more at a packed midnight show at Club Soda. Thursday night she wowed 'em again, this time at the Bell stage. Belting out gospel-influenced pop ditties into the heavy night air, her piercing pipes penetrated the drizzle that tried to put a damper on the party. She sounded like sunshine – bright, beaming rays of sunshine that are so damn hot you seek some refuge in the shade.

NATASHA HALL

PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE
Buddy Guy at Metropolis: It's the moments that matter.

Is it possible that a young person who has burst upon the jazz and pop scene like a tornado can possibly live up to the hype surrounding bassist-singer-composer **Esperanza Spalding**? After her show at the Gesù on Thursday night, I must rephrase the question: Is it possible to fall in love like the very first time? With a beautiful confidence that borders on cockiness, she zipped through her show, backed by a fine trio, with the greatest of ease.

She's a star. She's the real deal. And she's only 24, with the promise of enormous growth. It's unlikely we'll get to see her in such an intimate venue again, but one gets the feeling Ms. Spalding was born to fill large spaces.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

ONGOING

Jazz and flamenco, close cousins? Some people professed to see the resemblance on the opening night of **Jazzing Flamenco**, Tuesday at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde.

Highly polished as it was, this show from Compañía Antonio Najarro raised my pulse mostly to the extent that it provided flamenco. It is hard to integrate anything with this aggressive, virile folk genre, which relies on ethnic specificity to create its powerful effect. Abstract jazz-dance, by comparison, looks effete. Something tells me that Najarro's bloodless opening number, Improv, would close pretty quickly in Andalusia. To say nothing of Amigiselad, a gender-bending routine involving a drag queen in a half-trouser, half-lace costume.

Call me El Groucho, but it seems to me that we have spent enough time breaking down boundaries and cross-pollinating styles. How about a little purity for a change?

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

"You just had to walk down The Street," legendary jazz photographer **Herman Leonard** remarked to me, talking about Manhattan's 52nd St. during the 1940s, "and you could see everybody – Art Tatum here and Thelonious Monk there. It was paradise." No one has taken better photos of jazz people on and off stage (with a nod to William Claxton), and Leonard, 86 and a former student of Yousuf Karsh, revealed some secrets.

"Today you look at a screen and just click away. Back then, you had to set the lighting up and take your time and give it some thought." His photos, which will inaugurate the exhibition hall at the Maison du Festival in September, have the rare ability to simultaneously appear off-the-cuff and posed. From Ella and Duke to Bird and Satchmo, his subjects – and photos – are immortal.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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